

Being In Charge by dontburnthewitch

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Summary: Teenage relationships are difficult to understand, especially when El can't wrap her head around relationships in general.

Being In Charge

A sweaty, humid summer fell upon Hawkins, Indiana. The heat wave came suddenly and without mercy. The denizens of the town sat near spiraling electric fans with perspiration oozing down their bodies, or else slathering on sunscreen and going to the beach.

El, however, was content enough staying inside watching television. With no air conditioning in the Hopper cabin, she drank her way through nearly a dozen cups of cold water. She loved sitting there, watching old-timey movies. Hopper even showed her how to use the *vee-see-arr* (she thought that's what he called it). All she had to do was slide in the little black box of her choosing, and press the triangle button. Of course, he made sure she knew it was a very valuable machine, and the movies were worth quite a bit too.

Every other week, they stopped at the video store and selected a few movies to borrow. El still struggled with reading some of the titles and descriptions, usually judging her choices based on the covers alone. But what she liked the most about the movies on the little black boxes, was that they were so much newer than the black-and-white stuff they showed on evening television. They were darker, more adventurous, more scandalous.

That didn't mean she'd turned her back on the black-and-white stuff entirely. She liked the romantic features. They were fascinating windows into a world she'd only briefly touched upon. Yet, she always found herself quite confused. In the old-timey films she'd seen, she watched how often the man would take charge of the woman. He'd lead her up and down the streets, smoke cigars while she cooked dinner, and held the doors open for her. But the newer the films were, the less this became clear.

She asked Hopper about it once. He said it just didn't happen anymore. That it was old-fashioned. That now, it was "nineteen-eighty-five, for crying out loud" - whatever that meant. She'd pondered this, trying to slot herself in with the movie characters. She thought of Mike, and how he hardly seemed like the blunt and sturdy men of the old films. And still, she couldn't see herself in the woman's shoes either. Relationships were still incredibly confusing.

And El couldn't escape them. They were everywhere, entrenched in all movies and television, no matter the genre. Mike had her sit down and watch *The Empire Strikes Back* once, and while she was enthralled by the spectacle of it all, she only felt mystified when the dashing gunslinger kissed the princess. Sure they both looked lovely, but they'd hardly had any connection before. Maybe she'd missed something in the first movie.

But then, things got more complicated.

She'd rented a fascinating but frightening film about a killer in a mask. She knew the title of this one - *Halloween*. Initially, Hopper seemed hesitant to let her watch it. Reluctantly, he caved and made sure to let her cover her eyes during the scary parts. Only, Hopper hadn't seen the movie before. He didn't know there was... *sex* in it.

And that's how The Talk came about.

Hopper started by drafting what he called "The 'Don't Be Stupid' Rules, Volume Two" - a series of new guidelines to replace the old ones.

"Number one," he said, tapping the pen on the paper. "Don't go out after dark, unless I give special permission."

She liked this one. It made sense. She never liked being in the dark anyways.

"Number two - don't talk to strangers, and specifically stay away from strange men."

This also made sense. El hardly enjoyed talking to any males outside of Hopper, her friends, and their families. Other were foreign, bizarre, *mouthbreathers*.

"And number three," he said, raising his eyebrows at her. "Don't ever have a boy here while I'm not."

"What?" she demanded. "What about Mike?"

"Especially not him," Hopper pointed at her with the cap end of the pen.

"Why not?"

"Because teenage boys have a lot of things on their mind. Things you don't need to get into."

"Sex?" she asked, remembering the movie.

"Yeah. That."

"Explain."

Hopper began to groan, but was interrupted by a loud beep coming from his jacket.

"Hop," Florence's voice shot out of the radio. "We've got a situation. That Hargrove kid's been knocking over mailboxes again."

Usually, Hopper would demand to know why she was bothering him over such a small issue. But today, he leapt from the chair, clearly enthusiastic about his excuse to get out of the conversation with El.

"Yep, be right there," he replied into the radio while throwing the jacket on and heading towards the door.

"Wait!" El called. "You didn't explain."

Hopper tapped his radio. "Duty calls," he said. He pointed towards the list he left on the table. "Don't forget what I said about the rules. I'll be back later."

Clearly he'd been dreading The Talk. Dreading it enough, it seemed, that the next day, he shifted the burden onto Joyce. After all, she'd apparently already had The Talk with her two boys. Yes, Joyce talked to her about *sex* the same way she'd talked to her about *period* last year. They were both connected somehow. And while Joyce seemed very understanding and capable of answering questions, El still had to rely on her own brain to piece things together in a way that made sense to her.

She knew sex involved a lot of kissing and doing things with private parts. That's how babies got made. She also knew people - especially boys - liked to do it for fun, and that babies didn't have to get made

at all.

All of it was quite overwhelming and she started to wish she never asked about it.

"High school, here we are!" Dustin cheered as September rolled around. "Time for parties, booze, and losing our virginity!" he turned around to Max, Lucas, Mike, and Will, adding with a wiggle of his eyebrows, "Unless someone's lost theirs already."

"Dude, that's none of your business," Lucas said.

"Should I take that as a 'no', Madmax?" Dustin asked.

"Definitely," Max said.

Dustin turned to Mike. "And what about you?" he asked.

"Don't ask him that!" Lucas said. "God. El's so much further behind us that even kissing her must be like kissing a four-year-old."

"Is not!" Mike protested.

"I mean, maybe he kind of has a point," Max added, shrugging. "Aren't you scared you might be taking advantage of her?"

"No!" Mike said. "I'd never do that. Besides, we've kissed maybe three or four times. That's all."

"Are you kissing her, or is she kissing you?" Max asked.

"Both!"

"Alright, folks. Let's cool down. Maybe let's drop it?" Dustin piped up.

"You started it, dumbass," Lucas said. "And why'd you just ask us? Why not ask Will?"

"Will doesn't have a girlfriend," Dustin said.

"It's okay, guys. I haven't done anything like that either. We're all in the same boat," Will added.

"We gonna make bets who's gonna lose theirs first?" Max asked.
"Because my money's on Will."

"Will? Why him?" Mike asked.

"It's always the one you least expect," she said.

"If that's the case, it's gonna be Dustin," Lucas laughed.

Dustin whacked him on the arm before they headed inside for their first day at their last public school.

The day could have gone better. The entire time, Mike was reeling over the things Max said. Was he really taking advantage of El? Up until now, he'd never really considered how such a massive gap in development would affect their relationship. As middle-schoolers, it didn't really matter. They'd hold hands, go on milkshake dates, and watch movies. Now, with all those things Dustin was talking about, it was throwing the relationship into a new perspective. When she was around his age, Nancy was flirting with boys, having them sneak into her room to make out and do God knows what else.

He'd be lying if he said he'd never thought about more... intimate things before. That was a normal thing for teenage boys to do. He'd never considered it much more than being a thing that adults do. Like taxes and mortgage payments and drinking champagne on New Years Eve. But maybe Dustin was right. Maybe all of it was about to change.

"How was your first day?" Joyce asked her son as he came through the door.

"Alright," Will said, hanging up his backpack. "Got lost trying to find the science lab for second period, but other than that it was good."

He pulled a binder out of his bag and the accompanying textbook.

"Aww... Homework on the first day?" Joyce asked.

"Yeah. It's just math," Will said while he kicked off his shoes.

"Well maybe you can help Jane. Her math problems aren't as complicated as yours, I'm sure."

"Huh?"

Will craned his neck and saw El sitting at the kitchen table, Hopper quietly explaining something to her from a small activity book. Will carried his homework over and took a seat.

"First day finished already, champ?" Hopper asked him.

"Yeah," Will said, flipping through the textbook to get to the six questions he'd been assigned. He was about to reach for the case of supplies that Hopper had next to him, when a pencil suddenly levitated and drifted into his hand.

"Thanks," Will said, giving El a grin. "Hey! Your nose isn't bleeding this time."

"It's not big," she said. "It bleeds with big things."

"Hey, focus on schoolwork," Hopper said. He pushed his chair out and stood up. "I'm going for a smoke," he added. "Finish this up and you'll have plenty of time to talk."

He strolled over to the living room and shortly thereafter, Joyce followed him out onto the porch.

Will and El had been at their work for several minutes. It didn't seem like Joyce and Hopper were coming back any time soon. Their voices and laughter drifted in from beyond the screen door. Surely they were still catching up on old times. They were getting along awfully well lately. Will felt somewhat happy about this. Hopper was helping immensely with Joyce overcoming Bob and his untimely death. But simultaneously, if Joyce and Hopper got together, that'd make El to be Will's sister. He wasn't sure how much he liked that. Of course, he got along well with El, even though most of their time together was spent in near-silence like this. They mostly communicated with knowing glances and soft tactile affection. Yet, Will couldn't grasp exactly what it'd be like to have her as a sibling. And goodness, if El and Mike got married, Mike would be his brother-in-law.

"Will?" El asked suddenly. "I need some help."

"Oh?" Will slid over to the chair Hopper had been occupying, peering at her page of division problems. "Which one?"

"Not the math," she said. "It's about Mike."

Will swallowed, "What about him?"

"Who do you think is in charge?"

"In charge? What do you mean?"

"Mike and I. Is Mike in charge, or am I in charge?"

"Um..." Will stammered. "I don't know."

"When you have a girlfriend, will you be in charge?"

"I'm... uh, not going to have a girlfriend," Will said. "And besides, nobody has to be in charge in a relationship. Jonathan always told me it was about mutual respect."

"Mutual respect?"

"Yeah, like you both have equal say in things."

"Mutual respect," she repeated. "So if Mike wants something, but I don't want it, I should tell him no?"

"Of course," Will said. "Wait, has he been pressuring you?"

"No," El said, scribbling absentmindedly in the corner of the page. "Just wondering."

"Okay."

They returned to their homework. Or, at least they tried to. El seemed incredibly disinterested in long division, and Will kept sneaking glimpses of her and attempting to avoid awkward eye contact. He could hardly imagine Mike intentionally doing something to make El feel bad. Sure, he was passive-aggressive at times, but never to Will. And if he couldn't bring himself to do something like

that to Will, then how could he do it to El?

They had only been silent for a couple minutes before El posed another question.

"Why won't you have a girlfriend, Will?" she asked.

Will shifted uncomfortably. He figured he'd have to tell her at some point. It's not like he thought she'd judge him. She didn't exactly have the same frame of reference that everyone else had about these sorts of things.

"You know how boys usually like girls one way?" he began, his heart strangely calm for the truth he was about to divulge.

El nodded.

"Well, that's how I like other boys."

"Oh," El looked up at him. "Okay."

Will sighed in relief. It was really that simple, wasn't it?

"But hey, don't tell anyone else, okay?" he said.

"Why not?"

"Because some people don't like people like me," he put it bluntly.

"That's dumb."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Will said. "Anyways, you should definitely speak up if Mike is doing something you don't like. I'm positive he'd want you to do that too."

Their conversation died down as soon as Hopper and Joyce came back inside to check their homework progress. Quickly they went through as many answers as they could in order to hide their conversation. But even after they finished the exercises, they hardly had much to say to each other. Before she left, El made sure to give Will a tight hug and a pat on the back. Hopper drove her back out to that cabin in the middle-of-nowhere, and Will couldn't help but

wonder if, in time, that was something they wouldn't have to do any longer.

"I'm just dropping you off, and then I've got to go back out," Hopper said, pulling up in the cabin's driveway.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Hopper laughed. "Just 'okay'? You're not going to ask why?"

El reached over, tapping a finger against his police radio. "Duty calls," she said.

He smiled nodding. "That's right. Duty calls."

She got out of the car, unlocking the front door, and watching Hopper drive back out into the night. She thought back to the one time he'd asked if she wanted to call him "Dad" - something she still wasn't sure about. "Dad" was close to "Papa". Papa was gone. And there was a world of difference between Hopper and Papa. Hopper protected her from Papa, and surely couldn't be called something similar to him. But should she call him Hopper? Jim? Chief? She didn't know.

El went over to the couch, ready to resume her nightly ritual of television and movies while she waited for Hopper to return from whatever it was that he was doing. She was only a few seconds into flipping channels when there was a sudden knock at the door. Hopper must have forgotten something.

She peered through the peephole, met with a shock. She opened up the door and Mike stepped in.

"Hey, El," he said, slipping out of his shoes.

"You can't be here," she said. It wasn't that she didn't want him here. In fact, she was overjoyed to spend time with her boyfriend. But not alone. Not without Hopper there. Rule number three.

"Nobody knows," Mike replied, following her over to the couch. "Mom thinks I'm at Dustin's."

"Why are you here and not there?"

"Because I missed you," he said. The smile was so sincere, his face so gentle, and El could feel herself just melting at the sight.

She leaned in, meeting his lips with her own, figuring it'd be a brief but tender kiss. She wasn't expecting Mike to press back so desperately, wrapping a soothing hand around the nape of her neck. Oh, this felt exciting. A competition. She deepened the kiss and felt the tantalizing sensation of Mike running his tongue against her lower lip. It sent delightful ripples radiating through her.

El ran her hands up into Mike's hair, tugging at the back and receiving cute little noises from him. The next thing she knew, she was leaning back into the arm of the couch, Mike bearing over top of her. He'd just started exploring her mouth further when she realized she needed to stop.

"Wait," she said, backing off and gazing into his confused eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "I'm sorry. We can stop, if you want."

"You're not in charge."

"What?" Mike would have been offended if it hadn't been El to say it.

"The kissing is nice," she said. "But I don't want what comes next."

"Comes next?"

El bit her lip sheepishly before hissing the word, "Sex."

Mike almost choked. He shot upright, putting on an incredulous face.

"We weren't going to have sex, El," he said with a firm tone.

"We weren't?"

"No!" Mike said, embarrassed by the mere idea. "I mean, it's not like we shouldn't ever. It's just that... it's something for grown-ups. I don't even want to think about that yet."

"Good," El said, sitting back up next to him. "Me neither."

She crept closer, planting a kiss on his cheek. Standing up, she reached out and helped him up from the couch.

"You really should go," she said, leading him to the door.

"Yeah," he said, staring at his feet. "It was nice seeing you, though."

"You too."

They stood there, holding hands near the front entrance. Mike was clearly bothered. He said he didn't want to do those things, so why did he look so forlorn?

"Are you okay?" El asked.

"Of course," Mike replied. "I'm just so sorry I made you feel like that - scared I was gonna do something like that to you."

He slipped his arms around her, caressing her back. El rested her head on his shoulder, taking a deep breath.

"It's okay," she said. "Relationships are confusing."

"We'll get the hang of it."

She hummed in agreement, letting him kiss her forehead before they wished each other a good night.

After watching Mike disappear back down the trail, El strolled back over to the television. With a flick of her head, she shut it off, sending the evening movie into obscurity.

She could stand to get a new hobby.